

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**RESPONSE TO THE TRAUMA OF WORLD WAR II
AND JAPANESE CANADIAN INTERNMENT
IN JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN***

BA thesis

**ESTER SUUR
SUPERVISOR: *Asst. Lect.* EVA REIN**

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ABSTRACT

As trauma influences the lives of many people in different ways, it has become a prominent topic in literature. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* focuses on the traumatic experiences of Japanese Canadians during World War II and concomitant internment as well as the impact of these events on the community. This thesis analyses the novel in attempt to discover how two of the book's characters Aunt Emily and Mother react to this trauma and how it influences the novel's main character Naomi.

The thesis consists of four parts: the introduction, two chapters (literature review and empirical part), and the conclusion. The introduction places the novel in its historical and literary contexts. In addition, it includes an overview of the novel's plot. It also states the importance of the study and the research questions.

The first chapter is the literature review, which provides the necessary background to understand the issues presented in the empirical part. It provides information about the history of Japanese Canadians and their internment, silence in North American and Japanese culture, and trauma and its effects on people.

The second chapter contains an analysis of the novel. It explores the development and response to trauma of two sisters Aunt Emily and Mother. It also explains how these two characters influenced Naomi who is the main character of the book.

The conclusion summarizes the findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Trauma influences the lives of many people; however, it is not a universal experience. People experience different kinds of trauma and so their response to it also varies. To be able to move towards healing and to get a sense of other people's mindsets, it is important to share memories as stories (Shoenut 2006: 490). Accordingly, the issue of trauma and people's response to it has become a prominent topic in literature.

The Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa is a major contemporary writer to deal with trauma in her works. Kogawa was interned during World War II and thus she finds it important to address the internment and its effects on the Japanese Canadians. In her writing, she is interested also in identity and justice. She has published several poetry collections and three novels. *Obasan* is her first novel published in 1981. Through the related topics of trauma and silence, the novel is concerned with the influence of the internment on both the level of the Japanese Canadian community and the individual and enables the reader to observe different types of trauma as well as various ways of responding to it. The novel incorporates historical facts into fiction, for example, the Japanese Canadian activist and writer Muriel Kitagawa serves as inspiration for the character of Aunt Emily (Cheung 1993: 153). As a trauma and an internment novel, *Obasan* is one of the most important texts not only in the canon of Japanese Canadian, but also Japanese North American Literature (Tourino 2003: 150).

The protagonist and narrator of *Obasan* is Naomi, who is a schoolteacher in her mid-30s in the narrative present of the novel. Because of the internment of the Japanese Canadians during World War II, Obasan and Uncle Isamu raised Naomi and her brother Stephen. In the narrative present, the death of Uncle Isamu rouses Naomi's traumatic memories about her childhood and the internment. Aunt Emily, who is an activist fighting against the unjust treatment of Japanese Canadians, urges Naomi to remember the painful

memories. Her consistent need to talk about the internment disrupts Naomi's life, but with the encouragement from Aunt Emily, Naomi starts to remember the things that she had previously tried to suppress. The greatest trauma for Naomi is the absence of Mother and even though she is not physically with Naomi, she greatly influences her, nevertheless. Ultimately, Naomi learns about the fact that Mother was disfigured due to the bombing of Nagasaki and died some years later. After Mother's death, other adult characters respected her last wish and did not tell the truth to Naomi and Stephen. Aunt Emily and Mother, who are sisters, seem to be polar opposites due to several circumstances, including the fact that according to Naomi, Aunt Emily places her emphasis on speech, while Mother is silent.

The thesis builds on and explores the juxtaposition of two characters in Kogawa's *Obasan* – the sisters Aunt Emily and Mother, as this aspect of the novel has not received much attention by literary critics. This approach also allows for studying both the impact of trauma on the generation of the sisters as well as the next generation. I am going to find out answers to the following questions: What are the main factors and events that influence their development and response to trauma? Are Aunt Emily and Mother polar opposites or are they actually more similar than they first seem? How do Aunt Emily and Mother influence Naomi and her response to trauma? To answer the questions, the following literature review gives an overview of the development of the Japanese Canadian community and the treatment of Japanese Canadians during WWII. In addition, it provides the theoretical underpinnings for an analysis of silence and trauma in *Obasan*. In the empirical part, I am going to examine, firstly, the development and response to trauma of two characters, Aunt Emily and Mother. I will focus on the most important aspects that influence their development and response to trauma and analyse how certain events influenced Aunt Emily's and Mother's development. Secondly, I will also look at how Aunt Emily and Mother influenced the main character Naomi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several aspects affect development and response to trauma. To establish the issues which are connected with the development of Aunt Emily and Mother and their response to trauma in *Obasan*, it is necessary to explore the background of Japanese Canadians as a community, scholarship on the novel regarding trauma and silence in *Obasan* as well as introduce theoretical perspectives on trauma and silence.

1.1. Japanese Canadians and World War II

The first Japanese immigrant arrived in Canada in 1877; however, it was only in 1885 that the immigration from Japan increased considerably. Most immigrants from Japan were of low social class – they were often farmers or fishermen. As the Meiji era modernization and reforms had not improved their life standards, they came to Canada to improve their financial status. (Adachi 1979: 13) The majority of the immigrants were literate and had at least some education, but their command of English language was non-existent or very limited, as they had no plans to stay in Canada permanently. The fact that most of the Japanese immigrants did not speak English caused ghettoization and meant that their assimilation to Canadian society was relatively slow. (Adachi 1979: 29)

In Japanese culture, special terms are used to denote the immigrant generations: *Issei* are the first-generation immigrants from Japan, *Nisei* are the second generation who are born in their host country – in this instance Canada – and *Sansei* are the third generation. According to Mason Harris (1990: 41), the existence of these terms shows the importance of generations in the Japanese Canadian community. The above-mentioned terms will be used throughout this thesis to refer to the generations.

The event that has influenced the Japanese Canadian community the most, and that is also featured in Kogawa's *Obasan*, is likely the Japanese Canadian internment. After the

Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, Canada declared war, and during this period, Japanese Canadians were seen as a national threat. Until the internment in 1942, 97% of Japanese Canadians lived in British Columbia (Adachi 1979: 33) and the mainstream society there saw Japanese Canadians as “a racial and economic threat” (Goellnicht 1989: 288). Thus, World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbour were used as a convenient excuse to get rid of Japanese Canadians. In 1942, mass evacuation was announced. This concerned over 21,000 Japanese Canadians, the majority of whom were Canadian citizens. (Goellnicht 1989: 288) As most of the Japanese Canadian population resided in Vancouver, women and children were moved to the former stables of Hastings Park while men were sent to road camps in the Canadian interior (Adachi 1979: 218). Later that year, Japanese Canadians were relocated to former ghost towns and families were reunited (Adachi 1979: 248). In 1944, Japanese Canadians were presented with a choice to leave Canada or relocate to Japan or to move east of the Rockies (Adachi 1979: 277). The people who decided to stay in Canada were relocated and most families went to work in the sugar beet farms in the prairies (Adachi 1979: 280-281). All restrictions for Japanese Canadians were only removed on April 1, 1949 and they were also given the right to vote (Adachi 1979: 344).

The result of these policies was effectively the dispersal of the Japanese Canadian community on the West Coast as the people were living in small groups all over the country, trying to assimilate into the mainstream society (Goellnicht 1989: 289). Furthermore, the internment and the subsequent restrictions of movement caused many families to be broken and divided because their members were not able to see their relatives for long periods of time or not at all (Adachi 1979: 232). According to Goellnicht (1989: 290), the main purpose of *Obasan* is to reveal the lies in the official version of history and to depict the injustice against Japanese Canadians as caused by racism and paranoia.

1.2. Silence in the North American and Japanese Culture

Silence, both as an aspect of culture and communication, influences all of the three generations in *Obasan*. While silence may not be a central part of the identity of *Nisei*, their own silence influences *Sansei* and thus the Japanese Canadian community overall. On the one hand, in *Obasan*, the attitude adopted by *Issei* and *Nisei* to justify their silence is “for the sake of the children” (*kodomo no tame*), on the other hand, it actually cripples *Sansei* and the development of their identity. According to Fukuko Kobayashi (1997: 20), the Japanese concept of “*gaman*” or “preservance for the sake of family” adopted in addition to other characters by Mother and in some instances, Aunt Emily, was a decisive aspect that developed and preserved the silence that ultimately held back both Naomi and the Japanese community for a long time. Furthermore, there are several kinds of silence in the book: silence of the family, silence of the Japanese Canadian community and silence of the Canadian society.

The understanding of “silence” differs in the North American and Japanese cultures. Japanese culture has been influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, which have shaped the understanding and perception of silence. While in the United States [and the whole North America] silence is mostly seen as passive, in East Asian countries like Japan it has more complex meanings like pensiveness or grace (Cheung 1993: 127). Păloşanu (2013: 248) notes that in *Obasan* silence is not looked from the Eurocentric perspective as the opposite of communication; rather silence is seen as an indication of perceptiveness. Thus, silence is not seen as exclusively negative in *Obasan* like it is seen in the Eurocentric cultures. Furthermore, *Obasan* does not align itself with either speech or silence (Karpinski 2006: 56). By showing both Japanese and Eurocentric communication patterns, characters’ identities become more distinct (Păloşanu 2013: 253). This difference of cultures can be seen in Japanese ideographs for the word ‘love’. The first ideograph 愛 (あ い ai) contains the root

words ‘heart’, ‘hand’ and ‘action’. The second ideograph for ‘passionate love’ 戀 (こい *koi*) is formed of ‘heart’, ‘to tell’ and ‘a long thread’. (Kogawa 1994: 273) Naomi’s inspection of them brings out the fact that in Japanese culture silence and speech are complementary (Cheung 1993: 165).

King-Kok Cheung (1993: 128) notes that *Obasan* depicts different approaches to silence and language. One of the types of silence depicted in *Obasan* is attentive silence, which is influenced by Japanese culture. Attentive silence includes observing things and quietly understanding them. (Cheung 1993: 146) Attentive silence is mostly portrayed positively as it is associated with all of Naomi’s mother figures – Mother, Obasan and Naomi’s grandmother. However, *Obasan* also depicts how attentive silence can become a burden, especially for women, because it reinforces traditional attitudes regarding gender and motherhood. It can become confining for women to put others’ needs before their own and this can take a toll on them, as can be seen from how Obasan’s health has declined from serving others. (Cheung 1993: 151) Nonetheless, *Obasan* does not allow the negative aspects of silence override the positive ones (Cheung 1993: 146). Overall, according to Cheung (1993: 151), the novel does not ultimately suggest speech to be superior to silence in any way or form of its appearance.

Silence in *Obasan* is strongly related with trauma. The experiences of *Issei* and *Nisei* have influenced *Sansei* and made them silent. During the internment, *Issei* became silent to be seen as strong throughout their traumatic experiences, and that has been inherited by *Nisei*. Although that silence served in part to keep *Sansei* away from painful memories, in *Obasan* it backfires and rather causes them more suffering. (Cheung 1993: 144) Despite that, *Obasan* acknowledges the toughness of *Issei* and their silence is shown as brave (Cheung 1993: 145). However, the silence also leaves them vulnerable to “exploitation by the dominant culture” (Cheung 1993: 146).

Obasan shows both Eurocentric and Japanese approaches to silence; although, the book does not depict any approach to silence as superior. The novel also does not make a choice between speech and silence; instead, it makes it possible for them to coexist.

1.3. Trauma of World War II and Japanese Canadian Internment

Trauma plays a major role in *Obasan* as their traumatic past holds back the characters and is the basis for their silence, which further hinders their development. Most of the reception of *Obasan* has focused on the trauma experienced by Naomi. Naomi has experienced two intertwining traumas – the disappearance of Mother and the sexual assault perpetrated to her by a white man Old Man Gower. Literary scholars have interpreted both of these traumas also as indications of the overall injustice against Japanese Canadians (Gottlieb 1986, Lim 1990, Shoenut 2006). Likewise, the disfigurement of Mother during the bombing of Nagasaki has also been viewed as showing the trauma of the whole Japanese Canadian community (Lim 1990: 302). However, in addition to the traumas experienced by Naomi, Aunt Emily and Mother also have their own distinct traumatic experiences that shape their character.

To understand and analyse the traumas of the characters, the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder is useful. According to Cathy Caruth (1995: 4), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is usually defined as having

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.

According to this definition, PTSD cannot be defined by the event itself; rather it is defined by the reception of the event: it is experienced with a delay and people become fully aware of what has happened only later when they have repeatedly lived through it in their mind (Caruth 1995: 4). Trauma can reveal itself in different ways and can manifest itself both

mentally and in people's actions. One way that trauma expresses itself is silence (Caruth 1995: 154). This silence caused by trauma can also be seen in several characters in *Obasan*, including Naomi and Mother. By contrast, another way that trauma can manifest itself is constant talking (Caruth 1995: 154), which is also evident in *Obasan* in Aunt Emily's character. Furthermore, trauma often manifests itself through flashbacks and nightmares, and people experiencing these trauma-related episodes do not have control over them. (Caruth 1995: 151-152). In *Obasan* Naomi has recurring nightmares that relate to her childhood traumas, and her nightmares about her rape act as a way to show the overall injustice against Japanese Canadians (Gottlieb 1986: 45).

In her exploration of trauma in *Obasan*, Eva C. Karpinski (2006) applies another concept used in contemporary trauma theory, when she writes about witnessing in *Obasan*, with the novel being seen as a kind of testimony of the trauma related to the internment. This witnessing is not only communicated through characters, but also landscape and by connecting the suffering of the Japanese Canadians to Native Canadians (Karpinski 2006: 49-50). Karpinski (2006: 50) also identifies "the trauma of racialization", which reveals itself in the histories of the family and of the nation, and shows that not only the Canadian government, but also the ordinary people are at fault for perpetrating it. According to Karpinski (2006: 60), understanding of trauma in *Obasan* does not benefit from being looked from Eurocentric perspective, as it fails to consider some aspects of the book that are specific to Japanese culture. While in North America and Europe, the emphasis is often put on "talking cure", which means talking about one's trauma as a way of healing, it is not always possible and may do more harm than good. Instead of this, in her article Karpinski states the relevance of Caruth's contemporary take on trauma theory. Although it stems from Freudian psychoanalysis, it considers also historical and cultural contexts of trauma as well as gender, race and ethnicity. (Karpinski 2006: 59-61) According to Caruth (1995: 11), trauma theory

can act as a bridge between cultures and help to not only understand the past but also the present. Thus, *Obasan* encourages its readers to take on the role of witness and to think about the collective responsibility (Karpinski 2003: 62).

One of the traumas in *Obasan* that affects several female characters, including Aunt Emily, is the impact of the internment and the rampant racism on the way that Japanese Canadian women regard having children. Christina Tourino (2003: 135) notes that many ethnic texts by women depict female characters who for some reason do not procreate. While the characters may choose not to have children as their own free choice, Tourino (2003: 136) instead suggests that in *Obasan* the childlessness of the female characters like Naomi and Aunt Emily is not a self-conscious choice, but instead is related to trauma. According to Tourino (2003: 136), the alternative families have come about as a response to tragedy not as a way to somehow disrupt the patriarchal family model. The wartime internment and racism created a very hostile environment for having children and made women apprehensive to procreate (Tourino 2003: 137). The burden of history is also mentioned by Heather Zwicker (2001: 157), who notes that the fact that there are several childless female characters in *Obasan*, indicates that “the body simply cannot bear to reproduce history”. The result of the women not having children is the disruption of the community (Tourino 2003: 136) and for whatever reason they do not have children, the fact itself adheres to the mainstream Canada, who aimed “to prevent the propagation of the Japanese species” (Tourino 2003: 137).

There are several dimensions to trauma in *Obasan* and trauma expresses itself in various ways. Trauma in *Obasan* is inextricably linked with silence – characters express their trauma by being silent. However, trauma may manifest itself also in excessively talking. Moreover, traumatic experiences influence the characters’ attitude towards having children. Eurocentric approach to trauma has limitations to fully understanding trauma in *Obasan*.

Therefore, contemporary perspectives of trauma theory that allow historical, cultural and other contexts to be included in an analysis are more relevant to the study of Kogawa's novel.

2. AUNT EMILY AND MOTHER: THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND RESPONSE TO TRAUMA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON NAOMI

Aunt Emily and Mother are *Nisei* sisters, who may seem to be very unlike when looked at superficially. Indeed, they had divergent childhoods due to the fact that while Aunt Emily stayed in Canada, Mother spent long periods of time in Japan with their mother and thus at first seems to have developed more Japanese mindset and values. On the other hand, Aunt Emily is an independent woman who seems very immersed in the North American culture and does not seem to value the Japanese virtues like silence and putting others before themselves. However, when looking at both of them more in depth, it becomes evident that the sisters are not as dissimilar as they first seem to be. They both suffer their own traumas during World War II and thus while their destinies ultimately differ, their behaviour and communication or lack thereof with the *Sansei* characters Naomi and Stephen show that they are more similar than they first seem.

2.1. Childhood and Early Adulthood

Aunt Emily and Mother had contrasting experiences during their childhood and early adult years and thus their identities and overall lives are different. At first, Mother may seem to be fully immersed into traditional Japanese culture influenced by Confucianism and Aunt Emily to be assimilated into Canada. However, if looked at more thoroughly, they both share some common aspects like being able to fluently communicate in two languages and also to act as mediators between Japanese and North American cultures.

Aunt Emily and Mother had distinct childhood experiences that influenced their mindset and their later life. When the sisters were children, their mother would go to Japan and take Mother with her, while Aunt Emily stayed with their father in Canada. In *Obasan*, Naomi questions the influence of the arrangement to the happiness of the family (Kogawa

1994: 24). However, this arrangement does not seem to influence the relationship between the sisters and they are close during this period.

The events that happen during the early adulthood to the characters seemingly further enhance their differences. The sisters can be contrasted in regards of meeting the expectations of the society towards women at the time. While Mother marries Naomi's father Mark, Aunt Emily graduates from college, but unable to find a teaching position, she starts to help her father with his medical practice (Kogawa 1994: 25). Mother is a young woman, who married, had children, and overall performed the traditional gender roles in the society. Aunt Emily, on the other hand, is somewhat of a rebel in that department – she is highly educated, independent and decided to not start a family. However, her actions are not seen in a favourable light by everyone. For example, Uncle Isamu disapproves of Aunt Emily and her manner of living, as well as thinks that she is not feminine enough and is not fit for marriage (Kogawa 1994: 43).

Regarding their physical characteristics, the sisters are also noticeably different. Even the main character Naomi fails to see any similarities between them when looking at a picture from the time her brother Stephen was born:

To the left are Aunt Emily and Mother, the two Kato sisters, their heads leaning slightly toward each other. I have examined this picture often, looking for resemblances. The sisters are as dissimilar as a baby elephant and a gazelle. Aunt Emily, a pudgy teenager, definitely takes after Grandpa Kato – the round open face and the stocky build. She isn't wearing glasses here, though I've never seen her without them. The carved ridges of her short waved hair stop abruptly at her cheeks. She is squinting so that the whites show under the iris, giving her an expression of concentration and determination. Not a beauty but, one might say, solid and intelligent-looking. Beside her, Mother is a fragile presence. Her face is oval as an egg and delicate. She wears collarless straight-up-and-down dress and a long string of pearls. Her eyes, Obasan told me, were sketched in by the photographer because she was always blinking when pictures were being taken. (Kogawa 1994: 23)

Towards the end of the book Naomi sees another picture of her mother and herself, where Mother is very elegant and wearing fashionable clothes. That also contrasts with Aunt Emily, who is repeatedly described as having plain and mousy style.

While Mother may seem like an *Issei* rather than a *Nisei*, she actually has many of the characteristics that define *Nisei*. One aspect that is unique to the character of Mother is

her relationship with her daughter Naomi. Naomi describes feeling as if she is a part of Mother, “a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood” (Kogawa 1994: 77). Mother conveys Japanese values like communicating with silence and avoiding eye contact to Naomi. An incident where a man looks at Naomi and causes her discomfort with his gaze causes Mother to teach Naomi about the potential indiscreet implications of eye contact. Naomi mentions how her relatives that have been raised in Japan share the same sentiment that Mother, however, people raised in Canada like Emily, are “visually bilingual” and thus Naomi also learns to be like that. (Kogawa 1994: 58)

The way Mother communicates with Naomi depicts her *Nisei* characteristics. Mother raises Naomi in a bilingual and bicultural environment where English language mixes with Japanese and North American culture with Japanese one. Mother sings to Naomi a Western children’s song (Kogawa 1994: 62), but she also tells her about a Japanese folk hero Momotaro (Kogawa 1994: 66). Mother also talks to Naomi in both English and Japanese, which was a source of comfort for Naomi. It is as if Mother can read Naomi’s thoughts and is ready to provide for her even before anything happens.

The event that shows how easily Mother moves from one culture to another is when Naomi puts chicks in the same cage as the mother hen and the hen attacks the chicks. According to Willis (1987: 244) the scene acts as an allegory for the treatment of the Japanese Canadians (the yellow chicks) by the government and the mainstream society (the hen). Mother’s reaction is to not get angry, but instead to comfort Naomi without words:

All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak. Her eyes are steady and matter-of-fact – the eyes of Japanese motherhood. They do not invade and betray. They are eyes that protect, shielding what is hidden most deeply in the heart of the child. She makes safe the small stirrings underfoot and in the shadows. Physically, the sensation is not in the region of the heart, but in the belly. This that is in the belly is honoured when it is allowed to be, without fanfare, without reproach, without words. What is there is there. (Kogawa 1994: 71)

Thus, to apply King-Kok Cheung’s (1993) concept, Mother uses attentive silence here because she first attends to Naomi’s needs visually rather than by speaking to her. During

the incident Mother's actions, behaviour and even physicality is opposed to another woman, Mrs. Sugimoto, who in Naomi's opinion seems distant and cold. Mrs. Sugimoto appears to Naomi to be the opposite of Mother, because her glance towards Naomi is too long and invading. This suggests to Naomi that Mrs. Sugimoto condemns her for the mistake that she made and is not understanding like Mother. (Kogawa 1994: 71) After the incident when Mother and Naomi are alone in the house, they talk about the event:

‘It was not good, was it?’ Mother says. ‘Yoku nakatta ne.’ Three words. Good negation of good in the past tense, agreement with statement. It is not a language that promotes hysteria. There is no blame of pity. I am not responsible. The hen is not responsible. My mother does not look at me when she says this./.../She has waited until all is calm before we talk. I tell her everything. There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell. (Kogawa 1994: 72)

According to Brandt (1993: 118), the way that Mother handled this event by comforting and communicating with Naomi can be taken as criticism towards Western models of parenting, which are influenced by Christianity and judge the child for their behaviour, which makes children feel shame and guilt towards themselves.

However, the relationship between Mother and Naomi becomes different after Naomi is sexually abused by her white neighbour Old Man Gower. Naomi does not talk to anybody about the abuse, although she perceives that something in her relationship with her mother has changed. If before, Naomi felt as if she was one with Mother, she now feels like she has been physically removed from her and in her childhood dreams she relives her trauma: “My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half.” (Kogawa 1994: 77). Brandt (1993: 114) argues that this is the first – mental – separation between Naomi and Mother.

It becomes clear that as Aunt Emily and Mother had disparate experiences during childhood and their early adult years, they are considerably different. While Mother started a family and had children, Aunt Emily's decision to work and later study was more unconventional for a woman at the time. Nonetheless, they are not polar opposites, as it

would seem at first. They both have the ability to move between two cultures and languages and they often act as mediators between *Issei* and *Sansei*.

2.2. World War II

World War II and the internment of Japanese Canadians play a crucial role in *Obasan*. During this period, most of the characters were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to ghost towns and later to the prairies. However, this did not happen with either Aunt Emily or Mother. Instead, Aunt Emily was able to stay in Toronto and Mother went to Japan to look after her ailing grandmother. This distinguishes them from other characters in *Obasan* and influences their experiences. The main character Naomi did not see either of them during this period, so Aunt Emily and Mother are not part of the main narrative during the internment. However, the book contains Aunt Emily's letters to Mother that depict some of the struggles faced by Aunt Emily and the Japanese Canadian community overall.

In September 1941, a few months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, Mother goes to Japan to look after her grandmother. According to Brandt (1993: 114), this is the second, and permanent, separation between Naomi and Mother. As Naomi misses her mother, she adopts Obasan as her new maternal figure and notes how similar she is to Mother (Kogawa 1994: 81). Naomi's last physical tie with Mother is severed when Naomi loses the doll given to her by Mother during the train ride to Slocan, a ghost town where she would be interned. Consequently, the period of World War II and internment is defined for Naomi by the absence of Mother and the worry about not getting to communicate with her and thus not knowing about her situation.

During this period, it is possible to learn more about Aunt Emily, as she becomes an active figure in the Japanese Canadian community. Before the widespread internment measures, Aunt Emily talks to Naomi's father Mark about getting his parents out of Sick

Bay, where they are being held from coming back home (Kogawa 1994: 89). Nevertheless, Aunt Emily is not yet the person she will be later as she expresses her emotions more freely and does not yet seem to be the formidable woman that she is going to become later. Naomi herself mentions that while in her opinion, her other relatives could endure torture if needed, she believes that Aunt Emily could not (Kogawa 1994: 87).

During the war, Aunt Emily writes letters to Mother and later collects them to a diary that she gives to Naomi for reading. Through these letters, it is possible to get a picture of Aunt Emily's thoughts and inner life, unlike Mother's which we see through the eyes of others. In the letters, she mentions her activism in the Japanese Canadian community and participating in the publishing of the newspaper *New Canadian*, which at that period remained to be the only Japanese Canadian newspaper (Kogawa 1994: 97). The letters depict the escalation of the situation in Canada from taking away the fishing boats to the overall internment of Japanese Canadians. In 1942, Aunt Emily expresses her disbelief about the rumour that Japanese Canadian people are going to be held as war hostages because "that's so ridiculous since we're Canadians" (Kogawa 1994: 112). However, as the situation worsens, she becomes to distrust the mainstream media and the government even more. Aunt Emily also mentions the racial aspect of the behaviour towards Japanese Canadians comparing it to the treatment of German people in Canada (Kogawa 1994: 98).

During the internment, Aunt Emily's experience is different from that of other characters, because while other Japanese Canadians were sent to the ghost towns and later to the prairies, she gets the opportunity to live in Toronto – a big city, where no Japanese Canadians were allowed to live during the internment. Aunt Emily's contrasting experience during the internment is one of the aspects why Naomi resents her for talking so much about it and later questions her activism because of that:

All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know – those little black typewritten words – rain words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where

we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air. The words are not made flesh. Trains do not carry us home. Ships do not return again. (Kogawa 1994: 226)

In her letters to Mother, Aunt Emily herself also has doubts about her decision to move to Toronto while Naomi and others were sent to Slocan. She has plans to get Naomi and others to also be able to come to Toronto. However, these plans do not ultimately come to fruition and this causes a long separation between Aunt Emily and the rest of her family.

Mother's experience during World War II was different from Aunt Emily's and unique compared to the other characters because she was not in Canada but in Japan. She went there a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 to look after her sick grandmother and stayed there for the remainder of her life. While Aunt Emily writes letters to Mother during the war, she does not get any answers and often wonders in her letters about Mother's situation. Only after the war it became known that Mother was in Nagasaki at the time when nuclear bomb was dropped and was badly disfigured because of the explosion.

Due to her wounds she was expected to die, but she made a recovery and lived for some more years. She also adopted her niece's child after the bombing with the child being described as looking very similar to Naomi (Kogawa 1994: 283). Although she wanted to bring the child to Canada after the restrictions of movement for Japanese Canadians ended in 1949, she was not able to do so because the child was a Japanese citizen. Thus, she had to make a choice whether to stay in Japan with the child or come back to Canada and see her children. Possibly due to the fact that Mother knew that Naomi and Stephen had people who were able to look after them, she stayed in Japan with the child whose other relatives were all dead and acted as her mother.

Aunt Emily's and Mother's experiences during World War II and the internment were very different, however, they both had to face tragedy and changes compared to their previous lives. While Aunt Emily stayed in Canada and had the advantage of living in a big

city, the War and internment still affected her greatly because the Japanese Canadian community that she was part of was dismantled and her family was scattered across the country. At the same time, Mother was in Japan during this period, where she faced animosity because she was a Canadian citizen. She was in Nagasaki when the nuclear bomb was thrown on the city and she was badly disfigured; however, she lived for some more years and adopted her niece's child.

2.3. After World War II

The period after World War II and the internment is characterised by silence and suppression of painful memories. Although Mother is deceased, Naomi does not know it and the absence and silence of her mother haunts Naomi. Aunt Emily becomes even more active in the public sphere than she was before, becoming an activist for the Japanese Canadian community. However, despite the fact that she gets to know about the death of Mother, she does not tell about it to Naomi or Stephen, causing them to live with uncertainty and have doubts about their identity.

During this period Aunt Emily is an activist and tries to help other *Nisei* people to understand their suffering and remember it. She is against the prevalent idea held by *Nisei* that there is no reason to dig in the past and that it is better to be passive in regards of the injustice they experienced during the internment. For Aunt Emily, injustice of the past is still an issue that needs to be redressed, so that the Japanese Canadian community would be able to move on and rebuild themselves. Aunt Emily's constant insistence on talking can be seen as one of the symptoms of the trauma of internment and being separated from her family. Her activism can be seen as a way to deal with her traumas while helping other people in the Japanese Canadian community (Shoenut 2006: 488). Aunt Emily shows Naomi a manuscript that she has written, entitled "The Story of the Nisei in Canada: A Struggle for Liberty" – in

the manuscript Aunt Emily argues that *Nisei* are Canadian and that Canada is her native land (Kogawa 1994: 48). By giving Naomi countless documents and letters about the internment and the following period, Aunt Emily juxtaposes Naomi's memories with the supposed 'facts', which are used by the government and the mainstream media to dismiss the seriousness of the internment. Although the mainstream sources about the internment reveal contradictions and untruths they also illustrate the prevalent racism that formed a large part of the context of the internment and the treatment of Japanese Canadians (Goellnicht 1989: 294).

Even though Aunt Emily is active in the public sphere, she does not have her own family or children. While Aunt Emily's childlessness is marked on by Uncle Isamu (Kogawa 1994: 48), Emily herself does not discuss it in length. However, Aunt Emily mentions that the Japanese Canadian community has to deal with the internment while people still remember it because otherwise they (more specifically *Nisei*) will pass on their anger to their children (Kogawa 1994: 43). It can be concluded that this is one of the reasons why she has never started a family and is still single. On the other hand, Naomi, who also does not have any children, does not voice her reasons for it. Nevertheless, it is possible that it is related to Old Man Gower's sexual assault on her (Tourino 2003: 137). It is also evident that Naomi has problems with forming close relationships as can be seen when she goes to a dinner with the father of one of her students (Kogawa 1994: 8-9). During the dinner Naomi seems to feel very uncomfortable about the questions concerning her heritage, and the fact that she has to tell the same things about her background to almost every person that she meets. According to Tourino (2003: 136), Naomi appears to see an affinity between herself and Aunt Emily and relates their lack of children and family to their Japanese heritage: "Why indeed are there two of us unmarried in our small family? Must be something in the blood" (Kogawa 1994: 10).

From the time that Aunt Emily first visits Naomi after the internment in 1954, she tries to inject the will to fight in her. However, Naomi does not reciprocate until the present events in the book after Uncle Isamu has died. Instead, Naomi finds that she feels uneasy when people “talk a lot about their victimization” (Kogawa 1994: 41). Aunt Emily wants Naomi to remember the internment, not bury it under other memories. When Naomi expresses her apprehensiveness towards talking about the internment, Aunt Emily mentions the importance of remembering: ““You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene!”” (Kogawa 1994: 60). When Naomi does start to remember previous events after years of Aunt Emily sending her letters and documents regarding the internment, she sees Emily like a surgeon:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn’t enough, is it? It’s your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (Kogawa 1994: 232-233)

Thus, Aunt Emily is the person that ultimately pushes Naomi to remember and even though it is hurtful, it eventually leads to revealing the truth about what happened to Mother and Naomi and Stephen being able to come to terms with their lives and identities.

Despite her insistence on talking, Aunt Emily herself does not always follow the principles that she has set for others. When Naomi writes to her several times before her visit in 1954, Aunt Emily writes Naomi back about her search for Mother, although she admits that she is probably dead. Since she first comes to visit Naomi in 1954, Naomi repeatedly asks Aunt Emily to tell her what happened to Mother but Emily lies and says that she does not know anything. Even when Naomi is over 30 years old, Aunt Emily evades her questions about Mother. When Naomi asks her about Mother, Aunt Emily goes uncharacteristically quiet and instead of talking about it to Naomi, she decides to lie and tells Naomi that she has told her all about them (Kogawa 1994: 222). However, after Uncle Isamu’s death, while

looking at the files that Aunt Emily sent her, Naomi finds two government letters which show that Emily has been in touch with Mother and Naomi's Grandmother (Kogawa 1994: 254). At first, she finds the letters confusing and only when she gets to know what happened to Mother does she understand their context.

When Naomi inquires about Aunt Emily from Stephen before Emily's first visit, Stephen tells her that Emily is "not like them" (Kogawa 1994: 259), meaning Uncle Isamu and Obasan. As Stephen feels embarrassed by all things Japanese, him saying that could be interpreted as Aunt Emily being more immersed in North American culture, which is consistent with the fact that Emily is *Nisei*, while Uncle Isamu and Obasan are *Issei*. When Aunt Emily first visits Naomi, she is soon to be 40 years of age and has still not married which is pointed out by Uncle Isamu (Kogawa 1994: 260). Aunt Emily dismisses him and does not seem to be fazed by the comment. She shows her ability to move between languages and cultures when she acts as a translator for Uncle Isamu, when he quotes a haiku but Stephen does not understand it (Kogawa 1994: 261). On the last night of Aunt Emily's stay, Naomi overhears an exchange between Emily, Uncle Isamu and Obasan, where they discuss what happened to Mother and Uncle Isamu reads Mother's letters. Aunt Emily is against not telling about it to Naomi and Stephen, however, it is decided that for "for the sake of the children" (*kodomo no tame*) they will not tell them.

According to Brandt (1993: 114), the fact that her family hides what happened to Mother is the third separation between Naomi and Mother. Only after Uncle Isamu's death and with the push from outside of the family are Naomi and Stephen finally told the truth. Nakayama-sensei, an Anglican minister who is a family friend, comes to visit after Uncle Isamu's death. He sees Mother's and Grandma Kato's letters, whose contents have been previously hidden and this is the point where his title *sensei* (teacher in Japanese) comes to serve the narrative. He acts as a teacher to Naomi and Stephen because he is the person that

reads the letters to them and unfolds the mystery of their lost mother. This is the only time when Naomi hears directly from Mother and Nakane-sensei is also well aware of that as he encourages Naomi and Stephen to listen to her voice (Kogawa 1994: 279). However, *Obasan* does not provide the letters in their entirety, rather Naomi retells the contents of the letter and the book only contains a few short quotes from Grandma Kato's letters and the last words of Mother: "Do not tell..." (Kogawa 1994: 291).

Mother was in Nagasaki during the time that an atomic bomb was thrown on the city. She was severely disfigured but was able to survive. According to Lim (1990: 302), the lost mother stands for "displacement of an entire people", regarding the displacement of the Japanese Canadian community during the internment when they were exiled from the West Coast to the interior. It is not exactly known when Mother died, however, Aunt Emily describes her grave and that a Canadian maple stands there – even in Japan, there is a proof of her belonging to two distinct cultures and her Canadian heritage. According to Goellnicht (1989: 301), this is when Naomi understands that Mother is part of both Japanese and Canadian cultures. Naomi and Stephen also learn that the silence of the rest of the family came from the wish to respect Mother's last wish. Mother does not want her children to know about what happened to her and that leads to the crippling silence that lasts for years. Even Aunt Emily, who otherwise would want to talk about the situation, respects her sister's wish to stay silent.

After learning about Mother's situation during the war and her death, Naomi has problems coming to terms with it at first. She envisions her dead mother and has an imaginary conversation with her, where she questions her mother and herself: "Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I also not there?" (Kogawa 1994: 290). Naomi also acknowledges the influence of Mother's silence on her since she left: "The child is forever unable to speak" (Kogawa 1994: 291). According to Willis (1987: 247), Naomi starts to see her mother and

herself as victims of the misconception that “silence heals”. Naomi understands that her mother wanted to protect her with the silence, however, her silence has had the opposite effect – instead of protecting Naomi and Stephen, it hurt them: “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (Kogawa 1994: 291). Naomi eventually starts to come to terms with Mother’s passing and feels that even though Mother was not physically there for her, then her love was still with her. At the end of the book, Naomi wears Aunt Emily’s coat, indicating that she is coming to terms with her identity and maybe wants to become more active in the Japanese Canadian community. According to Tourino (2003: 150), it also symbolizes the fact that Naomi would be more accepting of Aunt Emily’s ideas and her activism.

The period after World War II is characterised by silence regarding the fate of Mother. While Aunt Emily becomes an activist and talks about other issues, she does not talk about her sister – as she respects her last wish, she becomes silent on the topic herself. Nevertheless, Aunt Emily pushes Naomi to remember the internment period and other painful memories, which eventually lead to Naomi and Stephen getting to know the truth about Mother. At first, the truth is shocking, but ultimately both Aunt Emily and Mother are essential for Naomi to come to terms with her past and present life and to understand her identity better.

CONCLUSION

Traumatic experiences and the response to them have become an increasingly important topic in contemporary societies. As demonstrated in the literature review, trauma can manifest itself in several forms, such as silence, excessive speech and nightmares or flashbacks – all of which are featured in *Obasan*. Among other aspects, trauma is also strongly connected to silence and that correlation is also explored in *Obasan*. The in-depth analysis of *Obasan* in the empirical part of the thesis has enabled it to perceive the complex aspects relating to trauma and its influence on people.

The development of Aunt Emily and Mother was influenced by several factors. Their childhoods were different due to the fact that while Emily stayed with their father in Canada, Mother often went to Japan with their mother. Their early adulthood was also marked by the contrast between the sisters with Aunt Emily working and leading an independent life, while Mother starting a family. During World War II, their experiences are also disparate because while Aunt Emily stays in Canada, Mother goes to Japan. The unique experience that influences Mother is the bombing on Nagasaki in which she suffers severe injuries. She chooses to not to speak about it to her children and thus remains silent. On the other hand, after World War II, Emily becomes an activist who seemingly chooses silence over speech.

While at first Aunt Emily and Mother may seem completely dissimilar, the analysis of the book reveals that they are in fact more similar than they first seem. While they both have unique experiences, both Aunt Emily and Mother have moments when they choose silence instead of speech. Thus, the juxtaposition of the speaking Aunt Emily and silent Mother is not true in some cases, especially regarding the silence of Emily on the death of Mother. The sisters are also similar in the way that they navigate between the Canadian and the Japanese culture with relative ease, either between the English and Japanese language or between the respective cultural norms and characteristics.

Naomi, who is the main character of the novel, is greatly influenced by both Aunt Emily and Mother. Their silence causes Naomi to be uncertain about her identity and the absence of Mother haunts her. Nevertheless, after the death of Uncle Isamu, Aunt Emily encourages Naomi to remember her past and accept it. However, it is only when Naomi learns about what happened to Mother that she starts to come to terms with her identity and her past traumas. Another aspect that Naomi has in common with Aunt Emily is the fact that they both do not have any children, which can also be seen as a symptom of the trauma related to the internment.

It is apparent that Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has not lost its relevance and its depiction of trauma is still compelling. The development and response to trauma of Aunt Emily and Mother is a poignant example of how people react to trauma in different ways. In the case of Naomi, it also shows that people's traumatic experiences and their reactions to it can influence others around them. While trauma is a very wide and complex topic, it is possible to get new insights into it by further exploring the issues concerning trauma and its manifestations.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ester Suur

Response to the Trauma of World War II and Japanese Canadian Internment in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

Reaktsioon II maailmasõja ja Kanada jaapanlaste interneerimisega seotud traumale Joy Kogawa romaanis "Obasan"

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva uurimistöö eesmärgiks on mõista, millised võivad olla erinevad reaktsioonid traumale ja kuidas need inimesi mõjutavad. Joy Kogawa romaani "Obasan" põhjal on võimalik vaadelda trauma mõju ning seda, kuidas reaktsioonid traumale erinevad. Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist (kirjandusülevaade ja empiiriline osa) ning kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus räägib uurimistöö olulisusest, toob välja uurimisküsimused ning sisaldab ka romaani lühikokkuvõtet.

Esimene peatükk on kirjandusülevaade ehk teoreetiline osa. See osa tööst keskendub empiirilises osas käsitletavate probleemide olemuse mõistmiseks vajaliku tausta avamisele. See sisaldab Kanada jaapanlaste ajaloo ülevaadet ning interneerimise mõju nende kogukonnale, vaikuse käsitlemist jaapani ja põhja-ameerika kultuuriruumis ning traumat ning selle mõju inimestele.

Teine peatükk on uurimistöö empiiriline osa. See analüüsib kahte romaani tegelast – tädi Emilyt ja Ema ning keskendub nende tegelaste arengule läbi nende erinevate eluetappide ning sellele, kuidas nad reageerivad traumale. Lisaks sisaldab peatükk ka nende kahe tegelase mõju analüüsi teose peategelasele Naomile.

Uurimistööst selgub, et kuigi tegemist on õdedega, on tädi Emily ja Ema elu olnud küllaltki erinev ning ka nende reaktsioon traumale toob seda esile. Vaatamata sellele ei ole õed aga täielikult vastandlikud nagu võiks raamatut lugedes alguses arvata. Nii tädi Emily kui Ema liiguvad nii Jaapani ja Põhja-Ameerika kultuuri kui ka inglise ja jaapani keele vahel. Samuti teevad and valiku jätta teatud asjadest järgmisele põlvkonnale rääkimata ning valivad selle asemel vaikuse. Mõlemad tegelased mõjutavad ka teose peategelast Naomit – nende vaikus pärsib Naomi identiteedi arengut ning Ema kadumine ja surm painavad teda.

Märksõnad: Kanada jaapanlased, kanada kirjandus, trauma, vaikus

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